

FNA Head Start provides culture, learning and excellence

Fran Cachucha walked into the FNA Head Start home and knew right away what she needed to do as the new Head Start Director.

“The land is everything. Everything is linked to the land,” she said. “It’s a strong heritage. It’s the whole family.”

That was in 2022, and since then Cachucha has overseen the development of a Head Start garden plot, a nature trail, firepit, gazebo, smokehouse, and canning station, all for the families of Head Start and their young learners. She’s also completed a new wing and additional outdoor playground. The work has earned national and statewide recognition.

In addition they provide winter gear, food boxes, and cultural knowledge to families.

Cachucha doesn’t take the credit, and praises staff, management and Head Start families for their involvement.

“We’re the change agent,” she said. “The program belongs to the children. The ideas are from the parents’ input.”

The garden, called K’edenyahh Denh Garden, is to address food insecurity that families might face and is used as teaching tool. It started several years ago, and now offers several huge harvests for families several times a summer. There are plans for drip irrigation and indoor hydroponics for herbs.

Maybe even a fruit orchard, too, she added.

The national Office of Head Start recognized K’edenyahh Denh and the nature trail as an innovative way to teach children about nutrition and Alaska Native culture.

“I want us to provide an unparalleled opportunity to enhance our workforce and our community skills to better serve our

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A young FNA HS learner tours the smokehouse.



Salmon strips hang from FNA HS new smokehouse.



Shirley Lee, FNA Deputy Director, shows the half-dried salmon ready for canning,

Dear Membership and friends,

2025 tested Fairbanks Native Association, beginning with uncertainty around funding and policy changes. Even during challenging times, FNA remained focused on serving our people, strengthening families, and honoring our mission.

Through it all, staff showed their continued commitment and dedication in their work. Children continued learning, families were fed and supported, elders and youth received care and guidance. Individuals facing personal hardships were met with compassion and safe space to support their journey. The work has never stopped.

By the end of the year, our perseverance was affirmed. FNA secured major federal grants to renovate the Women and Children Center for Inner Healing, expanded support in local schools, advance language education, and strengthen our community. These investments reflect trust in FNA's work and belief in the community we serve.

We continue to seek justice for missing and murdered Indigenous persons which remains a priority.

Despite the ups and downs, FNA's purpose has never wavered. We continue to promote justice, healing, and wellness while providing professional services grounded in tradition and delivered with an open heart.

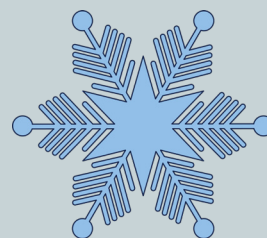
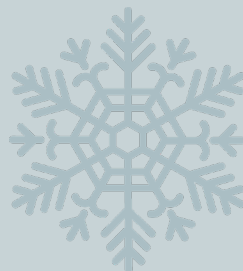
As 2026 approaches, I look forward to FNA continuing its mission with hope, gratitude, and confidence.

Basee'
Melissa Charlie
FNA Executive Director

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Executive Director



Memorial Cross dedicated to Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons

On a bright fall afternoon, Native leaders, law enforcement officials, community members, and families of the missing and murdered gathered in remembrance and solidarity to dedicate a large metal cross honoring Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons.

The cross is located at the Fairbanks Native Association Alaska Native Birch Hill Cemetery.

The memorial site also includes a bench where families and friends can sit, reflect, and remember their loved ones.

FNA Executive Director Melissa Charlie reaffirmed FNA's ongoing commitment to MMIP work.

"Today, we honor our loved ones and renew our shared promise to seek justice, healing, and change," Charlie said.

A poignant moment came when Sharon Hildebrand, FNA Board Member and TCC Vice President, shared the story of her late mother, Freda Semaken Schrock, who was murdered in Fairbanks in 1979. Thirty years later, her remains were found by a hunter in the hills outside Fairbanks. Many saw Hildebrand's story as echoing so many of the other stories behind the missing and murdered – the shock of the event, waiting for answers and closure, the heartache.

FNA invites all community members to visit the MMIP Memorial Cross at FNA Alaska Native Birch Hill Cemetery to honor and remember those who are missing or have been taken too soon.



In loving memory of our relatives who have been taken from us. You are never forgotten, and the love we share endures forever.



Base of MMIP Memorial Cross that will hold planted flowers.



L-R, Brian Ridley, TCC Chief and Chair, Sharon McConnell, FNA Board President, Melissa Charlie, FNA Executive Director, unveil cross.

A promotional banner for the FNA JOM 2026 Alaska Native Youth Basketball Tournament. The banner features a basketball hoop and ball on the left, the text "FNA JOM 2026 ALASKA NATIVE YOUTH BASKETBALL TOURNAMENT MARCH 9-11, 2026" in the center, and a QR code on the right. The background is a teal color with a basketball court pattern.



FNA JOM provides lesson help, food and more!

As soon as the end of school bell finished ringing, the hallway filled with students at Ryan Middle School.

Most were eager to leave the building. But a few headed directly to Elliott Wyatt's small afterschool tutor group room.

"What do you want to start?" Elliott asked one kid after another. "What are you here for?"

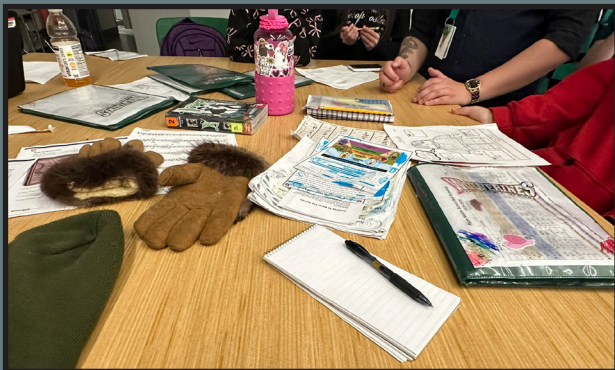
"Food!" every one of them answered. After getting a snack from a basket Elliott keeps, about a dozen students settled into bean bag chairs and regular chairs to start their homework.

"It's like a snowball," said Elliott, a former JOM student himself. "They come all at once."

Elliott is a tutor for FNA's Johnson O'Malley Program. He's been at Ryan for one year and knows the teachers, and the curriculum. Most importantly, he knows how to reach the students.



Elliott Wyatt, JOM tutor, waits for students at Ryan Middle School.



A table for study at Ryan Middle School

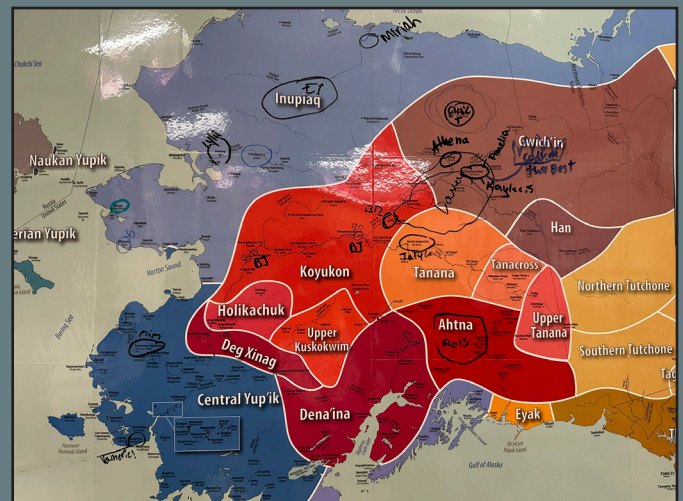
"Try this way," he coached a small group working on a long division worksheet. "Did that work?"

FNA JOM has Tutors and Family Service Coordinators working in elementary, middle, and high schools operated by the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District. The program provides academic tutoring, monitors attendance, and helps improve social-emotional skills for Alaska Native and

American Indian students. In addition to academic help, JOM provides food boxes, transportation, winter gear, hygiene kits, and anything to help students succeed in school.

They also work with parents, host cultural activities, and for high school students, provide career and leadership activities. Most of the funding comes from the Department of Education.

"For 58 years, the educational success of our youth has remained central to our priorities, while honoring and integrating



Alaska Native language map showing where Ryan Middle School JOM students are from.

our traditional values and practices in every way possible,” said Melissa Charlie, FNA Executive Director.

Charlie said FNA JOM is committed to increasing graduation rates, lowering dropout rates, closing the achievement gap, and teaching and sharing Indigenous cultural activities that strengthen identity and learning.

This past school year saw an increase in Tutors and Family Service Coordinators, which dramatically fell when the COVID-19 pandemic closed in-school learning.

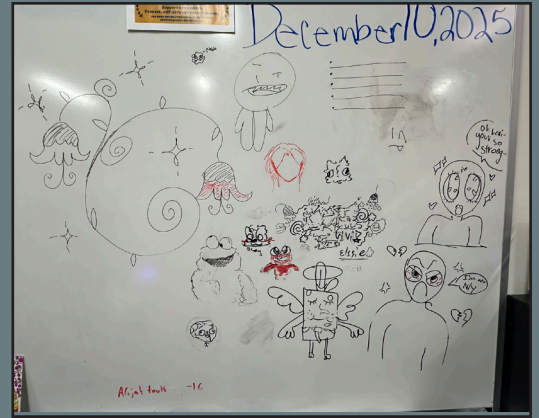
More JOM staff in schools means more students receive services, said Mary Willey, FNA JOM director.

“We get two to three new students a day,” said Willey, a former JOM student. JOM serves 700 students in the Fairbanks school district.

Elliott is seeing new students looking to improve grades in the waning days of the winter semester. He’s also seeing return students.

“I’m improving,” said Ryan JOM student, 13 and in 8th grade. “I don’t have distractions when I’m working here.”

For more information go to www.fairbanksnative.org



Students draw on Elliott's whiteboard for the month. Every month the board is erased and new drawings appear.

FNA JOM Tutors and Family Service Coordinators

Effie Kokrine Charter	Tsi-yaa Cuny	Family Service Coordinator II	Anne Wien Elementary	Eilleen Charlie	Family Service Coordinator
Lathrop High School	Tyler Brooks	Family Service Coordinator II (College/Career)	Anne Wien Elementary	Racheal Peter	Tutor
Lathrop High School	Sadia Munir	Family Service Coordinator	Denali Elementary	Peggy Kuryla	Family Service Coordinator
North Pole High School	Mikayla Faber	Family Service Coordinator	Hunter Elementary	Isabelle Green	Family Service Coordinator
North Pole Middle School	Samuel Winters	Tutor	North Pole Elementary	Rebecca Lovett	Family Service Coordinator
Randy Smith Middle School	Sydney Browder	Family Service Coordinator	University Park Elementary	Lesley Campbell	Family Service Coordinator
Ryan Middle School	Alayna Stotts	Family Service Coordinator	University Park Elementary	Gina McCarty	Tutor
Ryan Middle School	Elliot S-Wyatt	Tutor	Weller Elementary	Brittney Rush	Family Service Coordinator
West Valley High School	Chelsey Ayen	Family Service Coordinator	Weller Elementary	Jaylynn Hernandez	Family Service Coordinator
West Valley High School	Barry Baxter	Tutor	Wood River Elementary	Eadie Foster	Family Service Coordinator

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enrolled students,” she said. “I want us to be a center of excellence.”

All the Head Start innovations stem from the land, she said. It’s also a way to help families connect with their children’s learning environment and foster cultural pride. While FNA Head Start is recognized as an Alaska Native/American Indian facility, the program takes all children.

“Everybody wins,” she said. “Strong leaders come from this culture. Our value system is very powerful.” she said.

FNA Head Start has leadership examples, too. Recently, the Alaska Head Start Association recognized Melissa Charlie, FNA Executive Director, with their Humanitarian Award.

“Her voice captivates a new generation of leadership,” noted the association.

Mercedes Gomez, FNA Health Specialist, was named AHSA Early Childhood Coach of the Year. Jenniffer Hernadaz-Miranda, FNA Associate Teacher, was named AHSA Assistant Teacher of the Year.

Plans for a more hands-on environment are in the works, too. Cachucha is looking to build an amphitheater so students and families may practice singing, dancing, drumming while wearing Native regalia.

FNA Head Start is hiring as well as accepting students. For more information, visit www.fairbanksnative.org



Melissa Charlie packs salmon into canning jars.



A young gardener gathers soil for planting.



A play igloo awaits on the FNA HS walking trail.



FNA HS provided food for families.

FNA Head Start Mission

“FNA Head Start’s mission is to provide a safe, loving, and inclusive opportunity for each child to explore and discover their identity, culture, and traditional values. We collaborate with parents using relationship-based practices to help their child develop the emotional, physical, and cognitive skills needed to successfully navigate towards school readiness.”



FNA opens behavioral health office at UAF

Fairbanks Native Association has opened a behavioral health services outreach and screening office on the Troth Yeddha' campus of the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

The office, located in UAF's Student Health and Counseling Center at 1007 N. Chandalar Dr., is open to students, faculty, staff and all members of the Fairbanks community. The phone is 907-474-7043.

"This is a shared commitment between FNA and UAF to address campus and community behavioral health needs with in-person, confidential care," said Harry Conway, FNA BHS director. "The campus office is another option for people to find FNA support that might be more accessible."

The office will provide information and initial screening for FNA services, including the following.

- Outpatient and residential services
- Substance use disorder services
- Crisis intervention
- Youth, young adult, family and adult-specific services
- Peer support
- Recovery services
- Referrals for other care

Many of these services are covered by insurance or grant funding, but FNA does not turn anyone away due to inability to pay, according to Conway.

"UAF has again demonstrated its commitment to their community's well-being, and to Fairbanks, by providing office space, free of charge, to FNA Behavioral Health Services," said Melissa Charlie, FNA executive director.

Valerie Gifford, SHCC director, said that UAF is grateful to partner with FNA to bring these services directly onto campus.

"Having FNA's outreach and screening office here expands the support available to our students and employees, and it strengthens our ability to connect people with culturally informed, community-based behavioral health care," Gifford said.



FAIRBANKS NATIVE ASSOCIATION

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FAIRBANKS NATIVE ASSOCIATION

2026 FNA Board Election Three seats open

Candidates must submit a completed application to FNA Administration
 by 5 p.m., Monday, Feb. 2, 2026.

Applications and information may be found on our website
www.fairbanksnative.org

To be eligible for the FNA Board of Directors, you must be

- A direct descendent of an individual who was/is Athabascan, Inupiat, Yup'ik, Unanagan, Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, Cup'ik, Sugpiaq, Eyak, and/or Alaska Native/American Indian.
- A resident of the Fairbanks North Star Borough for at least 30 days
- Eighteen (18) years of age or older
- Not employed by FNA

Submit an application by Monday, Feb. 2, 2026 by 5 p.m.

Contact: Shaylene Dublin 907-452-1648, ext. 6235 or sdublin@fairbanksnative.org

FAIRBANKS NATIVE ASSOCIATION

FAIRBANKS CITY COUNCIL LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We respectfully acknowledge the Dena People on whose traditional lands we reside on. We honor the Dena who have been the stewards of Interior lands and waters for centuries, the elders who lived here before, the Dena people of today, and future generations to come. We also recognize that Alaskan Native people would traditionally gather here and harvest Native foods.

Denaal Denek'eeghee Nen'o
 (Benhti Kenaga)
 Merry Christmas!

Alussistuaqegcikici! (Yup'ik)
 Have a Merry Christmas!

Spraaznikam! (Unangam Tunuu)
 Happy Holidays!

FAIRBANKS NATIVE ASSOCIATION

Quviasugitchi Kraismaǵvigmiļu
Ukiutchaaramiļu (Iñupiaq)
 Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

Niłch'k'itniyi jan ch'u Dnaghełnigi
q'udi gyagh'a hey! (Dena'ina Athabascan)
 Best wishes and a Happy New Year!

I sigóowu kíswas toolkéix! Sigóowu
Yées Táakw! (Tlingit)
 We wish you a Merry Christmas!
 Happy New Year!

FAIRBANKS NATIVE ASSOCIATION

Behavioral Health Services

Chasing the Winter Blues

Resource fair for people of all ages to discover little things that make a big impact!

Join us and over 20 local organization as we share the little things that make our hearts whole. Discover community resources and create experiences!



Jan 17, 2026 ❄️ 12 p.m. - 4 p.m.
 Pioneer Park Civic Center

For more information, call (907)-452-6251 ext. 6445